

Patient

What I need to tell you is this:

that the day the doctors told me
I felt like I was stood on the precipice,
the wind howling in my hair,

tearing at my tattered winter coat,
snow drifts chattering to an avalanche
and not a soul around. Now

I'm the diver wavering on the edge
of the board: whole hours can pass
with nothing but the thought,

quivering on the lip. If I can execute
the perfect jump, a trained Olympic youth,
I can pass through to the other side

alive, with flawless shimmering technique.
But I am afraid, unsure, out of practice,
and hope waits like a lifeguard, half-asleep

in his chair. There is no one else here,
and the water grows cold, distant,
and unforgiving.

— Ben Wilkinson

Your anxiety

is the souped-up boy racer revving at the lights
beyond this door. Sure he's brash and insecure, a mess
like us all, but fuck it if anyone's gonna stop him.
Tonight's the night he flies out at the red
as you writhe in bed, every thought a near-miss,
the death-kiss his tyres give as they hiss
through rain the same fear gnawing at your brain
in the wee hours. Your eyes are his head-beams,
wide, unblinking, seeing only what they want to see.
Your breath: the motor pulse of wheel spin on a carpark;
your heartbeat: the flick of fag ash from his window.
He is sleeplessness, the same loop of a few blocks
till dark breaks, bleeds to light. And you are
awake, again, waiting for things to come right.

—Ben Wilkinson

The Bull

it came to my grandfather like a snorting bull
everyone could see it he couldn't
horns shaking at the dinner table crockery
against the wall my mother staring
in disbelief an upended chair that hot
hot presence held like the words
that get said and can't be taken back
a wedding the best man's speech silence
after the storm tears through the village
it could have been domestic cat-like
the way for some it hangs like a fattening
fruit bat suckling no less real for that
but for him it was the bull alright
brazen brutish the stamping beast
that is there and not there
unbiddable it circled his one-bed flat
matadors to the last we all found
the red rag worn by any unwitting
caller and that as they say was that

— Ben Wilkinson

Cage

Truth is, I lost my front teeth in '96 –
third round, sweat clinging to the walls,
pound-pound of a busted car alarm

in my skull. This business ain't flower
arranging. You go *mano a mano*, the animal
look in the eyes, tribal thump of the mob;

silence when the first blood draws.
But there's beauty in it, too: fear teaches
anyone about themselves. One minute

you're cock of the walk, crowing over
the fallen, next you're the one hitting
the deck, hearing the chorus

of a thousand devils. I know your type,
thinking every skinhead is some
chest-beater for the far right. Right?

There's tenderness to this; a kind of love
in hauling your broken brother up, sensing
the fine balance our lives hang in,

knowing the fight can never be won.

— Ben Wilkinson